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**Pagan Saxon Resistance to Charlemagne's Mission:  
"Indigenous" Religion and "World" Religion  
in the Early Middle Ages<sup>1</sup>**

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**Abstract**

What is "known" about the interplay between Paganism and Christianity in the Middle Ages grows more problematic with every new scholarly contribution. Recently it has become fashionable to assert that nothing can be known of the earlier oral tradition of Pagans, as all that remain are Christian texts written by Christian clergy who drew upon Biblical models such as Canaanite "idolatry" to depict the Paganism of medieval peoples like the Anglo-Saxons and the Frisians of whose religion they were ignorant. Extreme versions of this position deny the existence of Paganism entirely; this is because all the texts were produced by Christians, and other potential sources of information about Paganism (archaeological evidence, comparative Indo-European parallels, and folklore) are deemed inadmissible.<sup>2</sup> The encounter between literate, urban Christianity and non-literate rural Paganism in early medieval Europe resembles contemporary cases where the claims of "indigenous religions" (e.g. legal actions to establish native title mounted by peoples who were non-literate at the time they were colonized by Europeans) and "world religions" (e.g., missionary religion directly or indirectly facilitating colonialist enterprises) clash. Yet this is rarely recognized within the academic disciplines of history and medieval studies. This article considers the struggle between the Pagan Saxons and the Frankish Christian army of Charlemagne in the late eighth and early ninth centuries as a case study of an indigenous people and

1. A version of this paper was given at the "Critical Reflections on Indigenous Religions" Symposium at New College, University of Edinburgh, on 27 November 2010. My thanks are due to those who offered comments and criticisms, particularly Ulrich Berner and Jens-Peter Schodt, and to my research assistants Dan Bray and Dominique Wilson.

2. This skepticism rejects the comparative method of religious studies, where, for example, concerning a certain Anglo-Saxon motif or practice, archaeology and texts from the specific culture, comparative texts, and archaeology from other Indo-European cultures, and later Christian texts and folklore will be combined to develop a fuller understanding. Peter Buchholz's "Perspectives for Historical Research in Germanic Religion," *History of Religions* 8 (1968): 111-38 employs this skeptical method to dismantle and render invalid (for him) the category "Germanic religion".

religion being crushed by a universalizing world religion promoted by a globalizing colonialist empire. It argues that medieval Christian missionary and colonialist programs were intended to bring about the deliberate obliteration of indigenous Pagan cultures, a fact which is rarely recognized by scholars.

### *Introduction*

Medieval texts chronicle many encounters between Pagans and Christians. The majority of analyses of these encounters in the disciplines of history and medieval studies are uncritically pro-Christian and assume that the conversion of Pagans and their inclusion within the Christian world undoubtedly represented progress.<sup>3</sup> Religious studies is an interdisciplinary endeavor, and the range of material drawn upon to interpret phenomena is unusually broad and deep as a result. Medieval historical studies, by contrast, are usually narrow and have favored methodologies that tend to exclude material that would be admissible in the religious studies context. The two texts that sparked this research are the account of the felling of the Oak of Jupiter (or the Donar Oak), at Geismar in Hesse by the Anglo-Saxon missionary Wynfrith, better-known as Boniface of Devon, in 724 CE, and the destruction of the Irminsul, a Saxon monument, at Eresburg near Paderborn, by the army of the Frankish king Charlemagne in 772 CE. Most analyses of these confrontations between Pagans and Christians are unsatisfying or incomplete. The seeds of the contemporary erasure of medieval Paganism lie in James Carney's 1955 *Studies in Irish Literature and History*, which first articulated the "anti-nativist" position (that nothing could be known of Irish Paganism because the texts were produced by Christians), whereas prior to this the "nativist" position (that Irish texts from after the conversion period preserve aspects of the culture of Ireland prior to its becoming Christian) had been dominant.<sup>4</sup> This scholarly conflict initially was played out in the theatre of Irish studies, but in the last decade of the twentieth century, precisely the same quarrel has reared its head in late antique and early medieval Germanic studies.

In an edited volume on the conversion of medieval Germanic peoples, Ian Wood has argued that sixth-century Anglo-Saxon Paganism "was already modeled in part on Christianity, even before Augustine arrived.

3. Some recent scholarship attempts to redress this bias. See Michael Strmiska, "The Evils of Christianization: A Pagan Perspective on European History, in *Evil and Wickedness: Media, Film and Popular Culture*, ed. Terrie Waddell (New York and Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2003), 59–72.

4. James Carney, *Studies in Irish Literature and History* (Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1955).

Further, if there are Germanic shrines or temples to be found, some are likely to be re-used Roman temples or churches.”<sup>5</sup> In the same volume, Henrik Janson posited that the famous description of the Uppsala temple, in Adam of Bremen’s eleventh-century *Gesta Hammaburgensis*, is not actually about Paganism at all, but a reflection of the struggle between Emperor Henry IV and Pope Gregory VII.<sup>6</sup> This at-first-sight- unlikely argument encapsulates one of the tenets of anti-nativism – that the texts, first and foremost, are a source of material about ecclesiastical matters of importance at the time of their production, given that they were produced by Christian clergy.<sup>7</sup> A parallel and related scholarly conflict concerns the attack on “ethnogenesis” (“birth of a nation”) models in the study of the Germanic barbarians of classical antiquity in archaeology, philology, and history. This disagreement is between European scholars (e.g., Walter Pohl, Herwig Wolfram) who use Reinhard Wenskus’ term *Traditionskerne* (nuclei of tradition) and argue that small aristocratic bands were the transmitters of culture, and Anglophone scholars (e.g., Alexander Callendar Murray and Walter Goffart), who try to taint ethnogenesis models as *völkisch* and historians like Wenskus through associations with Nazi scholars, particularly Otto Höfler.<sup>8</sup>

The philosophical justifications for these anti-Pagan methodologies are far from clear, as it is unambiguously the case that the proponents of these positions are not all committed Christians or postmodern deconstructionists. Nevertheless, as methodologies develop in order to be applied, this article proposes that the models of “world religions” and “indigenous religions” from the academic discipline of religious studies can be usefully employed to facilitate new interpretations of early medieval Paganism and to draw parallels between the medieval and contemporary religious contexts. “Indigenous” literally means to be born of a place, and the ideal-type indigenous religions are particular, tribal, and land-based, holding “people together for responsibility and accountability via kinship traditions.”<sup>9</sup> They also may be this-worldly, orally trans-

5. Ian N. Wood, “Some Historical Re-Identifications and the Christianization of Kent,” in *Christianizing Peoples and Converting Individuals*, ed. Ian N. Wood and Guyda Armstrong (Turnhout: Brepols, 2000), 30.

6. Henrik Janson, “Adam of Bremen and the Conversion of Scandinavia,” in *Christianizing Peoples*, ed. Ian N. Wood and Guyda Armstrong, 88.

7. Kim McCone, *Pagan Past and Christian Present* (Maynooth: An Sagart, 1991), Chapters 1–3 and *passim*.

8. Alexander Callander Murray, “Reinhard Wenskus on ‘Ethnogenesis,’ Ethnicity and the Origin of Texts,” in *On Barbarian Identity*, ed. Andrew Gillett (Turnhout: Brepols, 2002), 67.

9. M. A. Jaimes Guerrero, “Native Womanism: Exemplars of Indigenism in Sacred Traditions of Kinship,” in *Indigenous Religions: A Companion*, ed. Graham Harvey

mitted, non-proselytizing, and folk-oriented, expressed in myths and traditional law, pluralist, and linked to subsistence economies and local understandings of warfare. These religions were referred to in earlier scholarship as “primitive,” “primal,” and “archaic”; terms that are now rejected as prejudiced and inadequate.<sup>10</sup> They are also sometimes described as “ethnic” or “kinship-based” religions. “Indigenous” is the best classification as it is able to subsume the full range of characteristics listed above; other designators usually emphasize one factor to the detriment of a fuller, more nuanced picture.

In contrast, the ideal-type world religions are characterized by written scriptures, systematic theology, proselytization, other-worldliness, elite orientation, exclusivism, and universalism, and are linked to expansionist economies and global understandings of warfare. These categories are problematic if applied uncritically, but are valuable if carefully employed. One frequent objection, that “world religions” as a category is historically determined by Christianity and is therefore inappropriate to religions other than Christianity, is here unproblematic, as the world religion under examination is medieval Christianity.<sup>11</sup> Yet it is true that the world religions paradigm includes only those religions that were deemed to be in some sense comparable to Christianity (Judaism, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, and the less canonical Chinese religions, Zoroastrianism, Jainism, and Sikhism).<sup>12</sup> As with the term “indigenous” religions, scholars have tried to substitute other terms for “world.” Similarly, this approach tends to promote one characteristic rather than the full range (e.g., Tishkin’s advocacy of “evangelical,” emphasizing the missionary aspect of such religions), and is therefore less adequate than “world religions” as a general designator.<sup>13</sup>

*The Symbolic Destruction of an Indigenous Worldview:  
Felling the Oak of Jupiter and the Irminsul*

Boniface’s felling of the Donar Oak is found in Willibald’s *Vita Bonifatii* (c. 768 CE), a hagiography that lionizes Saint Boniface, and seeks to render him uniquely influential in the conversion of the continental Germans, an image that is consolidated by his intimate relationship with

(London: Cassell, 2000), 48.

10. Graham Harvey, “Introduction,” in *Indigenous Religions*, 7-9.

11. Tomoko Masuzawa, *The Invention of World Religions: Or, How European Universalism was Preserved in the Language of Pluralism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 72-104.

12. Masuzawa, *The Invention of World Religions*, 2.

13. Joel E. Tishkin, “Ethnic vs. Evangelical Religions: Beyond Teaching the World Religion Approach,” *The History Teacher* 33 (2000): 303-20.

the family of Charlemagne and his dramatic martyrdom at Dokkum, in the Netherlands in 754 CE.<sup>14</sup> The episode is prefaced by remarks concerning the imperfect conversion of the Hessians, which suggests that there were Pagans, “syncretic” partly-Christianized people, and “orthodox” Christians in Boniface’s audience. Setting aside the problematic nature of these labels, the incident is narrated by Willibald as follows:

Many of the Hessians who at that time had acknowledged the Catholic faith were confirmed by the grace of the Holy Spirit and received the laying-on of hands. But others, not yet strong in the spirit, refused to accept the pure teachings of the Church in their entirety. Moreover, some continued secretly, others openly, to offer sacrifices to trees and springs, to inspect the entrails of victims; some practiced divination, legerdemain and incantations; some turned their attention to auguries, auspices and other sacrificial rites; whilst others, of a more reasonable character forsook all the profane practices of heathenism and committed none of these crimes. With the counsel and advice of the latter persons, Boniface in their presence attempted to cut down, at a place called Gaesmere, a certain oak of extraordinary size called by the pagans of olden times the Oak of Jupiter. Taking his courage in his hands (for a great crowd of pagans stood by watching and bitterly cursing in their hearts the enemy of the gods), he cut the first notch. But when he had made a superficial cut, suddenly the oak’s vast bulk, shaken by a mighty blast of wind from above, crashed to the ground shivering its topmost branches into fragments in its fall. As if by the express will of God (for the brethren present had done nothing to cause it) the oak burst asunder into four parts, each having a trunk of equal length. At the sight of this extraordinary spectacle the heathens who had been cursing ceased to revile and began on the contrary, to believe and bless the Lord. Thereupon ... [Boniface] built an oratory from the timber of the oak and dedicated it to St Peter the Apostle.<sup>15</sup>

Criticisms of this text within medieval studies often focus on its possible derivation from the tree-felling scene in Sulpicius Severus’ *Vita Martini*, written just prior to 400 CE and known to Willibald, and on the intrinsic unlikelihood of the Pagans’ rapturous acceptance of Christianity.<sup>16</sup>

Before determining how the deconstruction of Paganism has affected attempts to research the religion of pre-Christian European peoples, the second text must be considered. The account of Charlemagne’s felling of the Irminsul, a term glossed by Rudolf of Fulda as “universal column,

14. Carole M. Cusack, *The Sacred Tree: Ancient and Medieval Manifestations* (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2011), 95–101.

15. Willibald, “Life of Boniface,” in *The Anglo-Saxon Missionaries in Germany*, ed. and trans. C. H. Talbot (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1954), 45–6. The Latin text is Willibald, *Vita Bonifatii*, in *Monumenta Germania Historiae: Scriptores*, Tom. II, ed. G. H. Pertz, (Hannover: Impensis Bibliopolii Hahniani, 1829), 331–59.

16. Sulpicius Severus, “The Life of Saint Martin,” in *Soldiers of Christ*, eds Thomas F. X. Noble and Thomas Head (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1995): 1–29.

as if upholding all things,"<sup>17</sup> is recorded in the *Royal Frankish Annals* as follows:

772. The most gracious Lord King Charles then held an assembly at Worms. From Worms he marched first into Saxony. Capturing the castle of Eresburg, he proceeded as far as the Irminsul, destroyed this idol and carried away the gold and silver which he found. A great drought occurred so that there was no water in the place where the Irminsul stood. The glorious king wished to remain there two or three days in order to destroy the temple completely, but they had no water. Suddenly at noon, through the grace of God, while the army rested and nobody knew what was happening, so much water poured forth in a stream that the whole army had enough.<sup>18</sup>

When analyzing these two descriptions, certain classic religious studies motifs should be noted. The description by Willibald connects tree veneration with the Roman deity Jupiter, long associated through comparative Indo-European studies with the Greek Zeus, Vedic Dyaus Pitar, and the Germanic sky and thunder deity Donar / Thunor / Thor. The connection between this deity and trees is attested from Tacitus in the first century CE onward, and Hilda Ellis Davidson notes that "it seems that Donar, Thor's predecessor, like the Greek Zeus, was associated with the great oaks of the forest which covered much of western Europe."<sup>19</sup> Evidence from Greek mythology suggests that the shrine of Zeus at Dodona was an oak sanctuary where priests interpreted the rustling of the wind in the trees.<sup>20</sup> The Prussian shrine at Romowe which was still functioning in the sixteenth century, is described by Ellis Davidson as follows:

There was a holy oak in whose trunk were placed images of the gods. Before that of the thunder god, Perkuno, was a fire which was never allowed to go out. The fire was surrounded by curtains forming a shrine which only the high priest might enter to commune with Perkuno. The name of this god is linked with the Latin word for oak, quercus, and it is probable that Donar too was worshipped in sanctuaries of this type...<sup>21</sup>

The ninth century Benedictine monk Rudolf of Fulda's reference to the

17. Cited in Ruth Mazo Karras, "Pagan Survivals and Syncretism in the Conversion of Saxony", *The Catholic Historical Review* LXXII (October 1986): 563.

18. Bernhard Walter Scholz, *Carolingian Chronicles*, trans. Barbara R. Rogers (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1970): 48-49.

19. Hilda Ellis Davidson, *Gods and Myths of Northern Europe* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1964): 86.

20. See B. C. Dietrich, *The Origins of Greek Religion* (Berlin and New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1974): 227; and J. P. Mallory and D. Q. Adams, *Encyclopedia of Indo-European Culture* (London: Fitzroy Dearborn, 1997): 273.

21. Davidson, *Gods and Myths of Northern Europe*, 87.



Irmisul as a “universal column upholding the world” is also familiar to the religious studies scholar. The axis mundi is a motif found in many cultures, both in mythological and ritual contexts. The Norse world-tree Yggdrasill, supporting the nine worlds, is one example; the pillar and altar ritual spaces of the Vedic Indians another. This motif does not, however, seem restricted to the Indo-European peoples; Finno-Ugrian and Altaic cultures employ it as well.<sup>22</sup> The particular symbol is often associated with the theories of Mircea Eliade, who was for decades one of the titans of religious studies. In the past two decades his approach has been criticized as radically essentialist and ahistorical, insisting that religion be treated “on its own terms,” as *sui generis* and not contextualized within other human activities and meaning systems.<sup>23</sup> These criticisms do not mean, however, that the axis mundi does not exist, or that it has no bearing on the worldview of the Pagan Saxons. It merely means that Eliade’s theories must be firmly anchored in the particular historical context and that the closest and most culturally relevant comparative material be employed, rather than making generalizations about historically, temporally, and geographically unrelated cultures.

Did the early medieval continental Germans share this complex of beliefs about sacred trees? The evidence for pre-Christian beliefs in this geographical region is quite scanty. One text, the brief and tantalizing *Indiculus Superstitionem et Paganorum*, suggests a variety of practices representative of the religion of the Saxons, including “6. Of the sacred rites of the woods which they call nimidas... 18. Of the undetermined places which they celebrate as holy.”<sup>24</sup> Scholars have argued that the *Indiculus* is a list of headings from a much longer document; and that it was compiled by or for Boniface of Devon for the Synod of Leftines in 743 CE, or somewhat later for the archbishop of Mainz in the 790s. Boniface’s correspondence with Bishop Daniel of Winchester regarding how to convert Pagans in Germany demonstrates some interest in Pagan beliefs, lending support to the argument that Boniface was responsible for the *Indiculus*.<sup>25</sup> There is thus some evidence that trees were part of Germanic Pagan religion, which included both the Hessians and the Saxons, making it probable that a Christian missionary would find it

22. Mircea Eliade, *Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy*, trans. Willard Trask (Harmondsworth: Penguin Arkana, 1989 [1964]): *passim*.

23. Russell T. McCutcheon, *The Discipline of Religion* (London and New York: Routledge, 2003): 54-82.

24. Paul Edward Dutton (ed.), *Carolingian Civilization: A Reader* (Peterborough: Broadview Press, 1996): 3.

25. Boniface, *The Letters of Saint Boniface*, ed. and trans. Ephraim Emerton (New York: Columbia University Press, 1940): 48.



appropriate to destroy a sacred tree. This is congruent with the characterization of this religion as “indigenous,” placed-based, and local. Willibald’s account of Boniface’s action captured the Christian imagination; it was depicted in a number of manuscripts and on one distinctive alabaster now in the Victoria and Albert Museum, and constantly invoked in later texts.<sup>26</sup>

*Indigenous Religion: Identity and Saxon Paganism*

Scholarly arguments attempting to diminish the significance of Paganism, or to assert its non-existence, have postmodern qualities, in that they seek to confine history to the text and in some cases deny that the existence of anything outside the text can be posited. In analyzing these two texts, it is not really important whether the events described “really happened.” With respect to Boniface’s felling of the Oak of Jupiter, Richard Sullivan notes that attacks by Christians on Pagan objects of worship are logical. For Pagan audiences the failure of their gods to respond would be taken as evidence of the Christian god’s superior power.<sup>27</sup> Richard Sullivan sensibly opines that Pagans were therefore influenced in their response to Christian preachers like Boniface by factors such as the superior power of the Christian god and/or the Frankish forces; the character and conduct of the missionaries; and the offer of greater material prosperity by conversion to Christianity. Assuming a level playing field, this is the case.

Yet C. H. Talbot has argued that “in regions, for instance, which had been conquered by the Franks, Christianity and alien rule were synonymous. Whereas Paganism was equated with freedom and independence, Christianity was equated with subservience and oppression”<sup>28</sup> This contention is supported by slightly later evidence, such as Nithard’s comment on the Stellinga revolt of 841-842 CE “that Norsemen and Slavs might unite with the Saxons who called themselves Stellinga because they are neighbors, and that they might invade the kingdom to avenge themselves and root out the Christian religion in the area.”<sup>29</sup>

26. The alabaster is discussed in W. L. Hildburgh, “Representations of the Saints in Medieval English Alabaster Carvings,” *Folk-Lore* LXI. 2 (1950): 80

27. Richard E. Sullivan, “The Carolingian Missionary and the Pagan,” in Richard E. Sullivan, *Christian Missionary Activity in the Early Middle Ages* (Aldershot: Variorum, 1994): 705–40.

28. C. H. Talbot, “St Boniface and the German Mission,” in *The Mission of the Church and the Propagation of the Faith*, ed. G. J. Cumming (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970), 46–47.

29. Nithard, *Historiarum libri IIII*, 4.2, p. 42, cited in Eric J. Goldberg, “Popular Revolt, Dynastic Politics, and Aristocratic Factionalism in the Early Middle Ages: The

The mention of “avenging” suggests that the Franks knew that those people violently forced into Christianity under their overlordship held legitimate grudges about this fact. Missionaries were backed by Frankish military might; Boniface traveled with armed bodyguards. Geismar was barely inside Hessian territory and the presence of Christians in the Hessian audience no doubt alerted the Pagans to the coming of change.

At the time of Boniface's oak-felling the peoples of Hesse and Thuringia, Frisia and Saxony, the hinterlands of the Frankish kingdom, were becoming aware of Christianity. The fall of the Donar Oak symbolically prefigured the collapse of their worldview, which became unviable as their microcosm encountered the Frankish macrocosm, the eighth century equivalent of a global culture and a “world religion.” Culturally aware theorists of conversion, such as Robin Horton, note that the encounter of the microcosm with the macrocosm, and of polytheism with universalizing monotheism, inevitably results in cultural and religious change, usually in the form of cultural adaptations to facilitate the survival of identity in the newly “globalized” world.<sup>30</sup>

Indigenous religions are local, earth-bound, and this-worldly. Compelling evidence can be assembled to support the contention that indigenous cultures recognize no division between the “secular” and the “sacred.” Identity, a notoriously slippery concept, will be here linked to religion through the formula of sociologist of religion Hans Mol, which suggests that religion is the sacralisation of identity:

The advantage of the definition...is...1) it draws attention to a process (sacralisation) rather than a fixity (religion)... 2) it links religion to survival in that the ubiquity of religion appears to have something to do with the way it increases the viability of systems and their relations in a field of cooperating, but also contending units of social organization ... Therefore we have to add this to the definition a) that sacralisation of one identity may contribute to the weakening of another and b) that the mechanisms of sacralisation (transcendentalisation, commitment, ritual, myth) have developed the wherewithal to desacralise in order to ensure both function and survival.<sup>31</sup>

Saxon Stellinga Reconsidered,” *Speculum* 70 (1995): 495.

30. Horton's thesis, best known from his classic paper “African Conversion,” *Africa* 41 (1971): 85–108, argues for three factors facilitating conversion from local, indigenous traditions to globalizing monotheism. These are the identification of key factors in the intellectual background of the indigenous religion which create a bridge to the new religion; the fact that exposure to the global macrocosm leads the tribal culture to conclude that local deities and spirits are inadequate and that a universal deity is superior; and finally that the major stakeholders (including rulers and priests) will quickly convert to preserve their status in the new world order.

31. Hans Mol, “Religion and Identity: A Dialectical Interpretation of Religious

It is not clear what Boniface's audience thought of the Donar Oak, and their world view remains shadowy. More can be said about Charlemagne's destruction of the Irminsul at Eresburg near Paderborn. This ushered in a new era of rapid change and of observable shifts in the sacralisation of identity for the Pagan Saxons, which are preserved in texts.

Christian missions had acknowledged the potential of the state to enforce religious "conversion" since the Church had become intimately bound up with the later Roman Empire through Emperor Constantine in the early fourth century CE. Monotheism is in essence universalizing and intolerant, where polytheism is local and pluralistically legitimate. When monotheism encounters pluralist beliefs, its instinctual tendency is to deem them "wrong" and to eradicate them. Lawrence Duggan, commenting on the *Royal Frankish Annals*, accuses earlier scholars such as Sullivan of ignoring the implications of the entry for 775 CE, which reads, "while the king spent the winter at the villa of Quierzy, he decided to attack the treacherous and treaty-breaking tribe of the Saxons and to persist in this war until they were either defeated and forced to accept the Christian religion or entirely exterminated."<sup>32</sup> For Duggan, it is clear that Charlemagne envisaged two possible futures for the Saxons—conversion to Christianity or eradication through genocide.

By the time of this entry, the Irminsul had already fallen. Charlemagne's war of joint religious conversion and military conquest commenced in 772 CE and ended more than thirty years later. So what was the Irminsul, and why was its destruction important? Rudolf of Fulda's gloss on "Irminsul" has already been noted, as has its felling, as described in the *Royal Frankish Annals*. As with Boniface and the Donar Oak, there are skeptics among medievalists with regard to the content of this text, particularly concerning the existence of the temple complex. Traditionally Germanic people conducted worship in groves,<sup>33</sup> and temples are virtually unknown—and what is known is from texts treated, justifiably, with caution. This extends to archaeological evidence also. Proponents of anti-nativist revisionism frequently insist that Germanic Pagans only ever built temples in imitation of Christian churches, or indeed that they

Phenomena," in *Identity Issues and World Religions*, ed. Victor C. Hayes (Adelaide: AASR, 1986): 71–72.

32. Lawrence G. Duggan, "'For Force is Not of God?' Compulsion and Conversion from Yahweh to Charlemagne," in *Varieties of Religious Conversion in the Middle Ages*, ed. James Muldoon (University Press of Florida, 1997), 49.

33 Tacitus, *Germania*, Chapters 39 and 40 particularly, in Tacitus, *Dialogus, Agricola, Germania*, ed. and trans. William Peterson (London: William Heinemann, 1914): 277–79, 318–21.

never built temples, but later Christian authors refer to temples because they are modeling "Paganism," about which they know nothing (being Christians) on Christianity.

However, Eresburg is close to Paderborn, where Charlemagne later established an administrative centre when Saxony had been absorbed into the Frankish Empire, and a few years after the fall of the Irminsul, mass baptisms took place there. These facts highlight the significance of both the site and the water source, and indicate for Sullivan and other scholars that it had been an important cult centre.<sup>34</sup> The next issue to consider is the significance of the Irminsul and the consequences of its destruction.

Recently important contributions to the discussion of the sacred tree in Pagan Germanic religion have been made Richard North and Clive Tolley. With regard to the Irminsul, North analyses the centrality of the world-supporting cosmic ash tree Yggdrasil in Scandinavian mythology and its association with judgment and fate.<sup>35</sup> Tolley connects to this the syncretic gesture by the Christian King Oswald of Northumbria in erecting a cross before his battle against the British King Cadwalla at Hexham in 634 CE.<sup>36</sup> The site at which this took place was called Hefenfelth ("heaven-field"), a name which Bede notes is ancient: that is, pre-Christian or Pagan.<sup>37</sup> Tolley concentrates his attention on a passage in Widukind's *Res Gestae Saxoniae*, which describes the erection of an ad hoc Irminsul after a significant victory. The Irminsul sustained the Saxon universe, but as Eliade has observed, it need not be the only center.<sup>38</sup> Karras suggested there may have been others, noting the place name Ermenseul in Lower Saxony, near Hildesheim. Other world-supporting or territory-defining trees are known from Finnish (Suomi), Lappish (Saami) and Altaic cultures; and from medieval Irish texts also (e.g., the Yew of Ross and the ash-tree of Uisnech).<sup>39</sup> Trees therefore signified the upholding of the cosmos in the Germanic world, and were foci for Pagan ritual centers where legal and religious upholding also took place. To fell such a world-support is semiotically identical to destroying the sacralized identity resting in it.

34. Sullivan, "The Carolingian Missionary and the Pagan," 709.

35. Richard North, *Heathen Gods in Old English Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

36. Clive Tolley, "Oswald's Tree," in *Pagans and Christians*, ed. T. Hofstra, J. R. Houwen, and A. A. MacDonald (Groningen: Egbert Forsten, 1995): 149-173.

37. Bede, *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, trans. Leo Sherley-Price, revised R. E. Latham (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1990), 144-45.

38. Mircea Eliade, *Patterns in Comparative Religion*, trans. Rosemary Sheed (Lincoln, Neb.: Bison Books, 1996 [1958]), 373.

39. Mary Low, *Celtic Christianity and Nature* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1996), 89-91.

Earlier it was suggested that Boniface's blow heralded the collapse of the indigenous traditional worldview. Charlemagne willfully pursued a policy of military subjugation of the Saxons and Frisians. The felling of the Irminsul shows him striking at the heart of Saxony, by desecrating an important ritual centre. The simplest form of early medieval Germanic conversion to Christianity took place in centralized regions where a king who had been approached by missionaries could decide (after consultation with his council) to peacefully bring about the transition, a model which is normally called "top-down" conversion.<sup>40</sup> Saxony and Frisia lacked centralized monarchies, which meant that it was not possible that an individual or a small clique could decide on the part of all the people. This fact also meant that resistance to conversion would be manifested across the population, although certain people did become prominent leaders. Charlemagne followed up his ritual destruction of their world by concentrated and intentional actual destruction of that world. The tale recorded in the Royal Frankish Annals, which were compiled between 787 and 793 CE and later revised (possibly by Einhard, one of Charlemagne's intimates) makes grim reading.

*World Religion: Charlemagne's Military Campaigns Against the Saxons*

After the 772 CE campaign the Saxons revolted promptly in 773. This revolt focused partly on an attempt to burn the aforementioned church erected at Fritzlar by Boniface from the wood of the Donar Oak. The Pagan Saxons had also previously burned the church erected by St Lebuin, a missionary from Ripon, who had preached in Saxony at some time between 745 and 770 CE. In passing, it could be argued that Boniface had sought to appropriate the power of the oak for his new deity, as frequently occurred when Christians appropriated Pagan sites.<sup>41</sup> The *Annals* report the Pagans were unable to burn Boniface's church, and while this entry is cloaked in pious legend, it fails to answer the question as to why the Saxons wished to destroy that particular church (not merely because it was Christian, but possibly because it was associated with Boniface's impious appropriation of a Pagan Hessian sacred tree?).

The year 775 CE saw Charlemagne inflicting defeat and forcing baptisms upon the Saxons. Fifteen separate military actions were conducted between 777 CE and 810 CE, some of which were extremely savage (for example, in 782 CE, 4,500 Saxon rebels were hanged at Verden on the

40. Carole M. Cusack, *Conversion Among the Germanic Peoples* (London: Cassell, 1998), 173–180.

41. Goldberg, "Popular Revolt," 473–74.

Weser). However, despite these concentrated efforts to destroy them, the Saxons rebelled in 773 (mentioned above), 776, 778, 782, 784 (aided by the Frisians), 798, and 809 (aided by the Obrodites), all in all seven times in Charlemagne's lifetime. In the light of the argument concerning religion and identity, based on Horton and Mol, Pagan religion is intimately part of the Saxon struggle. This fact is acknowledged by some scholars in medieval studies including Ruth Mazo Karras, Richard E. Sullivan, Christopher Carroll, and J. M. Wallace-Hadrill.<sup>42</sup> In 785 CE, Widukind, the rebel duke who provided a rallying point for the Saxons, was bribed into being baptized. This event did not deter him in his struggle against Frankish colonial oppression; he promptly apostatized and continued as leader of the Saxon resistance.

The *Royal Frankish Annals* and the *Annales Laurissenses Minores* (seventh to ninth centuries CE, composed at the abbey of Lorsch), among other texts, reveal the extent of Charlemagne's earnestness in the destruction of the remaining independent "traditional" indigenous Pagan Germanic communities. Identity is nurtured by and within the community, where non-literate people pass on traditional learning. Charlemagne forcibly expelled Saxons from their lands and re-settled them in remote parts of the Frankish empire from 794 through 804 CE. Some sources claim that one-third of the Saxons were thus uprooted. Adding to this the terrible casualties of the war, Saxony was radically depopulated. The *Saxon Capitularies*, legislation published in 785 and 797 CE, prescribe severe penalties for continued Pagan religious observance:

If anyone among the race of the Saxons hereafter concealed among them shall have wished to hide himself unbaptised, and shall have scorned to come to baptism and shall have wished to remain a pagan, let him be punished by death.<sup>43</sup>

Most contemporaries of Charlemagne admired his hard-line stance on the conversion of the Saxons. There were, however, criticisms, chiefly from the Anglo-Saxon cleric Alcuin of York, who urged that "fides res est voluntaria, non necessaria" (Faith is a voluntary matter, not one of coercion).<sup>44</sup> To a modern observer, Charlemagne's techniques are only too familiar. The indigenous peoples of many modern colonized coun-

42. Karras, "Pagan Survivals and Syncretism in the Conversion of Saxony"; Sullivan, "The Carolingian Missionary and the Pagan"; Christopher Carroll, "The bishopricks of Saxony in the first century after Christianization," *Early Medieval Europe* 8. (1999): 228-29; and J. M. Wallace-Hadrill, *The Frankish Church* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983).

43 Dutton, *Carolingian Civilization*, 59.

44. Luitpold Wallach, *Alcuin and Charlemagne* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1959), 27.



tries were killed in combat, had people relocated to reservations and mission stations, families torn apart as couples were segregated and their children taken from them, and traditional learning denigrated and suppressed. Knowledge of the condition of the Australian Aborigines, more than two hundred years after their land was seized and their worldview dealt a vicious, almost mortal, blow, makes a mockery of Sullivan's pusillanimous insistence that "one must conclude that the missionaries working in Saxony won converts by means other than political compulsion."<sup>45</sup>

A significant postscript on the forced conversion and destruction of Pagan Saxon society occurred in 841 CE during the civil war between Charlemagne's grandsons Louis the German and Lothar for control of Saxony. Recorded in the *Royal Frankish Annals* and the *Annales Bertiniani* (and two other primary sources) is the tale of a revolt by a group of Saxons calling themselves Stellinga (meaning "restorers," or "companions" in the military sense) who supported Lothar because he promised that "if they should side with him, that he would let them have the same law in the future which their ancestors had observed when they were still worshipping idols."<sup>46</sup> Concealed in the Royal Frankish Annals passage regarding this revolt is a sad truth: the writer notes that traditionally the Saxons had three classes; the aristocrats (*edhilingui*), the free peasants (*frilingi*), and the unfree peasants (*lazzi*).<sup>47</sup> Since the forced evacuations make the population of Saxony difficult to ascertain, and Charlemagne had given the emptied lands to loyal Frankish nobles and some Saxon nobles who had jumped ship in the manner of Horton's third postulate, it is unsurprising that Luther's blandishments were made to *frilingi* and *lazzi*, with no mention of the *edhilingui*.

It is interesting to speculate what might have been involved in Luther's offer of "freedom" to the Saxons. It is possible that even thirty years after Charlemagne's campaigns in Saxony had ceased that many people still desired to throw off the yoke of Christianity and re-commit to "worshipping idols," to their traditional Pagan indigenous religion. Whatever the case, Lothar failed, and by September of 841 CE the victorious Louis the German had put down the Stellinga "not without rightful bloodshed."<sup>48</sup>

45. Richard E. Sullivan, "Early Medieval Missionary Activity," in *Christian Missionary Activity in the Early Middle Ages*, 23.

46. Scholz, *Carolingian Chronicles*, 167.

47. Goldberg, "Popular Revolt," 471.

48. Scholz, *Carolingian Chronicles*, 168.



### Conclusion

Indigenous people in the contemporary world have been regrouping since the mid-twentieth century, and in some more liberal cultures of the First World, land rights claims have succeeded (for example, the Australian Aborigines, the Inuit in Canada, the Amerindians, the Lapps or Saami in Norway, and even the Ainu in Japan). Indigenous religion and spirituality are also being revived in new contexts; modern Paganism, which is a vibrant and meaningful religion for a growing number of people, could be interpreted as an indigenous revitalization movement.<sup>49</sup>

The Saxons were gradually absorbed into a completely Christian world. Maintenance of their traditions could not result in their revival into a liberal, inclusive climate in the future. What did happen was that syncretic Christian forms were developed in Saxony, which could be seen, in Mol's terms, as the process of sacralized forms becoming desacralized to ensure survival, "in that the ubiquity of religion appears to have something to do with the way it increases the viability of systems and their relations in a field of cooperating, but also contending, units of social organization."<sup>50</sup> Conflicts of interpretation continue over the conversion of Saxony, with those espousing anti-nativist agendas insisting that Christianity was rapidly and joyfully accepted. For example, Wolfert Van Egmond discusses monasteries and the role of monks in the conversion and concludes that the process of establishing monasteries in the ninth and tenth centuries proceeded swiftly and successfully.<sup>51</sup> However, his brief article appears unconvincing compared to Christopher Carroll's much lengthier study that acknowledges the centrality of monastic foundations in rebuilding Saxony, but argues that "there were no pre-existing wealthy monastic foundations ... the Saxon nobility were at best only very recent converts ... even progression to family religious houses was slow,"<sup>52</sup> and which emphasizes the fact of the exclusion of the Saxon nobles from office and power until well into the tenth century.

Of course, some Saxons did embrace Christianity, and for understandable reasons. Karras attributed the motivation of the one hundred and

49 Prudence Jones, "The European Native Tradition," in *Nature Religion Today*, ed. Joanne Pearson, Richard H. Roberts and Geoffrey Samuel (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1998), 77–88.

50 Mol, "Religion and Identity: A Dialectical Interpretation of Religious Phenomena," 72.

51 Wolfert van Egmond, "Converting Monks: Missionary Activity in Early Medieval Frisia and Saxony," in *Christianizing Peoples and Converting Individuals*, 38–45.

52 Carroll, "The Bishoprics of Saxony in the First Century after Christianization," 228–29.

seventy-seven young noble Saxons who became monks at Corvey to the desire “to be assimilated into the Frankish upper classes and to gain the favour of the king.”<sup>53</sup> J. M. Wallace-Hadrill finds it “astonishing” that the Saxons eventually decided that their conversion to Christianity was all for the best. He notes that “their Poeta Saxo, writing at the end of the ninth century, could represent the Saxon nobles as deeply loyal to the Carolingians and grateful for their conversion.”<sup>54</sup> In the early twenty-first century we can perhaps understand it more readily; indigenous people around the world, dispossessed through colonialism, have embraced Christianity fervently.<sup>55</sup> The Saxon solution can be seen in literary texts such as the anonymous *Heliand* and Otfrid’s *Evangelienbuch*, and is a suitable solution to the problem of identity: unable to preserve their traditional weltanschauung entire, they filtered Christianity through their Saxonness and profoundly changed it in the process, as James Russell has suggested.<sup>56</sup> Their world-affirming, local and pluralist faith had little need of the alien Christian message. In order to create that need, it was necessary to destroy the indigenous religious worldview and leave the Saxons clutching the offered universal, other-worldly, Christian certainty as they faced a profoundly uncertain future. This strategy, in which Christian colonialists create an ongoing crisis to which Christian soteriology is offered as the solution, is manifested in modern colonial contexts. The felling of the Irminsul shattered the Saxon world and world view, and the campaigns of Charlemagne created the ongoing crisis through which generations of Saxons struggled to retain and reshape their identity, eventually to emerge in the tenth century as Christians.

Although it has not been the intention of this article to probe the underlying reasons for advocating the erasure of Pagans from the early medieval historical record, it appears politically naïve or worse to ignore these reasons, when the evidence from modern colonial encounters is considered. Even in “peaceful” conversions to Christianity the indigenous Pagans were deprived of their traditional way of life and religion. In the case of the violent conquest and conversion of the Saxons, their culture underwent a seismic shift when it encountered the Christian world religion. Their indigenous worldview became unviable as their microcosm

53 Karras, “Pagan Survivals and Syncretism in the Conversion of Saxony,” 556.

54 Wallace-Hadrill, *The Frankish Church*, 184.

55 The case of the Australian Aboriginal forced acceptance of Christianity is discussed in Tony Swain, *A Place for Strangers* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993) and Tony Swain and Deborah Bird Rose, eds., *Aboriginal Australians and Christian Missions* (Adelaide: AASR, 1988).

56 James G. Russell, *The Germanization of Early Medieval Christianity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), passim.

clashed with the Christian macrocosm, the early medieval equivalent of a global culture and a world religion. The Christians stripped the Saxons of both their Paganism and the land that nurtured their traditional worldview. For a historian to examine texts and discover only Christianity, and to deny the very existence of Paganism, can only be regarded as a significant moral lapse. To uncritically view conversion to Christianity as a positive and to fail even to mention the wanton destruction of Pagan culture and religion, is to applaud and ratify the results of colonialist expansion and globalization, while ignoring the cynical and brutal means through which that end was reached.

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